

NEW HAMPSHIRE SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOLS

GETTING STARTED

A USER'S GUIDE



Encouraging students in kindergarten through eighth grade to safely walk or bicycle to school



Introduction

Welcome to New Hampshire's Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program.

SRTS is a decades-old, well-established program with international origins that has spread across the United States. It is now supported by the federal government under the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users or "SAFETEA-LU."

At the state level, SRTS is administered by the N.H. Department of Transportation (NHDOT).

As the name suggests, the program is designed to encourage elementary school children, in kindergarten through eighth grade, to safely walk or ride bicycles to school. Affected children, including those with disabilities, live within approximately two miles of school.

For a variety of reasons, ranging from fear of crime and bullying to concerns about traffic hazards, the number of children getting to school under their own power has declined dramatically in recent decades.

The decline in walking and biking to school reflects a trend toward general inactivity, often accompanied by unhealthy diets. When children develop sedentary habits that last into adulthood, they face the risks of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, asthma and cancers.

In many communities, walking and biking have been replaced by rides in private cars, pickup trucks, vans, SUVs and the like. In addition to negative health effects for the children, these single-occupancy vehicles cause traffic congestion near schools. This contributes to air pollution and wastes fuel when motors idle while adults or older siblings wait for kids.

Ironically, a ride to school in a private vehicle is no guarantee of safe passage. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for children 14 and under. In 2004, for example, 493 pedestrians and bike riders under 14 were killed and an additional 29,000 injured. That same year, the toll for those riding in motor vehicles was 1,638 children killed and 246,000 injured.

Getting started

SRTS is an unusual program in that it brings together people from all sectors of the community, including officials who work across jurisdictional lines. Educators, municipal officials, parents, students, and advocacy organization form what is known as a SRTS local task force.

The reasons for this should be obvious. People who live or work in the community will have the greatest understanding of the reasons local children are not walking or riding bikes. They can work together to find innovative and creative ways to encourage walking and biking.

Including municipal officials on a SRTS task force is important because some problems will be solved off-campus. Public works and planning officials might work to provide sidewalks or bike paths. Law enforcement solutions – cracking down on speeding motorists or on those who fail to stop in crosswalks - need police support and participation.

Parents and students are important because they will have the best understanding of any reluctance to walk or pedal.

Physical and health education professionals and school nurses can help incorporate safety education into the curriculum.

Planning

The SRTS task force will bring together all of the affected parties in a cooperative planning process. A comprehensive plan can lead to funding under the federal program. New Hampshire's share of the national appropriation is \$1 million per year for each of the next five years.

Task forces will examine local conditions using a framework known as the 5Es:

- **Evaluation**
- **Education**
- **Encouragement**
- **Enforcement**
- **Engineering**

Projects will be divided into two categories: non-infrastructure and infrastructure.

Between 10 and 30 percent of the federal money must be reserved for the non-infrastructure projects. This can include the expense of designing a program, educating children about safe walking and riding practices, training crossing guards, and educating motorists about slowing down in school zones and stopping for pedestrians in crosswalks.

A minimum of 70 percent of the federal funds will reimburse local communities for the so-called infrastructure projects. These are physical changes to encourage walking and riding.



Dr. Susan Lynch, New Hampshire's first lady, leads a group of students and parents on a walk to Kimball School in during a "Walk-to-School" day organized by the Concord SRTS task force.

A key goal of the SRTS program is to reach the largest number of children possible. This means the local task force should try to identify the most densely populated neighborhoods within two miles of a school.

Finding solutions

This first step is **evaluation**. Across the country, standardized survey forms and an on-line data collection system are being developed to measure the transportation choices of children and their parents, while determining why so many youngsters who live nearby are driven to school.

The process is well underway in some communities. In Nashua, for example, a SRTS study conducted by the Nashua Regional Planning Commission in cooperation with community and school groups showed a variety of reasons that parents were reluctant to

have kids walk to school. Speeding traffic was one concern. Fear of bullies and strangers was another. Sections of sidewalks in disrepair were also a problem.

Recognizing the potential problem through the evaluation process leads to other parts of the 5Es.

Although bicyclists are required to follow the same rules of the road as motorists, younger children who haven't taken a driver's education course won't necessarily be aware of bike safety. The **education** component can make a difference. Many communities sponsor bike rodeos, bring certified cycling instructors into the schools, or incorporate bike and pedestrian safety into health or physical education course.



The **encouragement** component adds the element of fun to the SRTS program. Hundreds of children and parents have participated in “Walk-to-School Day” in Farmington. Sometimes a single event such as a walking or biking day is used to raise awareness and kick off a more comprehensive program. To overcome concerns about exposing children to crime, escort programs have been used in some communities. These include the “walking school bus” or a “rolling bike train.” With either approach, a group of youngsters accompanied by an adult volunteer find safety in numbers while the grownup encourages kids to follow safety rules.

In Concord, a concern about speeding motorists prompted an **enforcement** campaign in which the local police increased their visibility near schools at the beginning and end of the academic day. Signs showing the speed limit and a radar-generated display of a motorists' actual speed helped slow traffic.

Physical changes are part of the final “E,” classified as **engineering** solutions. These range from new signs and road markings to new or repaired sections of sidewalks or bike paths.

Funding

The planning efforts of the local SRTS task force can be valuable whether or not a community decides to compete for federal reimbursement for its projects.



Hundreds of kids and parents gather for a “Walk-to-School” day in Farmington.

NHDOT will invite local schools, their communities, and supporters to submit applications for reimbursement funding.

Most initial awards will be for non-infrastructure projects. Some of these projects – conducting a survey, sponsoring a bike rodeo or cycling safety class, and holding a school assembly on safety issues, for example - can be implemented fairly quickly.

Funds can also be used for more detailed survey and planning work that will lead to applications for a more-expensive infrastructure projects.

SRTS is a federal program with minimal restrictions. Our goal at the state level is simple: to encourage as many children as possible to safely ride bicycles or walk to school. We want to ensure that limited funds are used as effectively as possible, and that people at the community level participate as fully as possible.

The funding program will be flexible enough to allow schools that are already well organized to submit applications for infrastructure proposals. Infrastructure projects must be included in the state’s 10-year Transportation Improvement Plan and then the Federal Highway Administration’s Statewide Transportation Improvement Plan.

Federal guidelines also permit advocacy and non-profit organizations to submit applications. For example, a statewide program to send bicycle safety instructors into schools could be considered. The program is also flexible enough to allow individual schools to work together, with a task force organized at the district or SAU level.

Detailed scoring criteria and application guidelines are available to those who want to apply for federal funding. They can be found on the NHSRTS Web site.

Getting started

Again, the whole process can begin with the formation of the SRTS local task force. When representatives from all segments of the community sit down together, they will pool their combined wisdom to come up with solutions and ensure that all stakeholders are kept informed.

NHDOT's Safe Routes to School coordinator is ready to provide advice on getting task forces organized and help local participants find solutions. NHDOT also wants to learn from the successes and failures of local efforts and spread the word to more and more communities.

Through the efforts of this federal-state-and-local initiative, our legacy will be a new generation of healthier, energetic adults.

For more information on the N.H. Safe Routes to School program, contact:

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http://www.nh.gov/dot/bureaus/planning/SRTS_home.htm

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Revised 07/25/2007